

The Theology of the Hebrew Bible-Old Testament

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Biblical theology, with Old Testament theology as an eventual subset, was a relatively latecomer on the scene of biblical study. It emerged as a discipline distinguishable from systematic or dogmatic theology in the seventeenth century, with the role of providing the biblical evidence for the assertions of systematic or dogmatic theology. In the eighteenth century it began to assert itself as a discipline that should define its own categories rather than simply act as handmaid to systematics, and in 1787 Johann Philipp Gabler delivered a lecture that is commonly seen as a key articulation of this conviction, "An Oration on the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each."¹ A number of nineteenth-century Old Testament theologies worked with Gabler's prescription, though they also continued to be influenced (consciously or unconsciously) by the categories of systematics, by the philosophical views of the day, and by New Testament priorities that led to an emphasis on marginal topics such as resurrection and a neglect of topics that are prominent in the Old Testament but not in Christian faith. It became customary for Old Testament theologians to draw attention to the way their predecessors were affected by the presuppositions of their time, but not to recognize the same dynamics in their own work. In the twenty-first century, post-colonial or feminist or other postmodern perspectives are the equivalents to the evolutionism, rationalism, or romanticism of the nineteenth century. These provide frameworks that theologians bring to their study, which both illumine it and skew it.

Walther Eichrodt

One such framework is the assumption that Old Testament theology needs to be approached historically, and it became common for theologies to comprise two parts, one tracing the history, the other covering its theological implications in topical fashion. Indeed, the energy in nineteenth-century Old Testament study came to lie in tracing the history of Israel's literature and religion against their middle-eastern background. This rather left hanging the question of the Old Testament's ongoing religious and theological significance. It was after the 1914-18 war in Europe, and parallel to the work of Karl Barth in Christian dogmatics, that some Old Testament scholars began once more to think in theological terms. This development

¹ English translation in Ben C. Ollenburger (ed.), *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future* (revised ed., Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 497-506.

came to a climax in the 1930s with the three-volume *Theology of the Old Testament* by Walther Eichrodt, a colleague of Barth in Switzerland.² It was the first great attempt to synthesize the thinking of the Old Testament and the first Old Testament Theology that remains enlightening in what it says about the Old Testament rather than being of interest purely as part of the history of the discipline.

Ironically, this is so despite the fact that Eichrodt fails to achieve either of his two stated aims. There is regularly a disparity between the statements about aims and method with which Old Testament theologians begin their works, and the insights and implications about method that emerge from them, and Eichrodt well illustrates this phenomenon.

Eichrodt aims to identify the constant fundamental nature of Old Testament religion, the system of faith that underlies the entire Old Testament, and to demonstrate how this faith links distinctively with that of the New Testament. In this connection he emphasizes Yhwh's covenant, which Eichrodt takes as key to understanding the relationship between Yhwh and Israel, though not to understanding Yhwh's relationship with the world in his second volume. Although aiming to make a cross-section of Old Testament faith, in his chapters on different topics he commonly takes a historical approach, seeking to show how understandings of (for instance) the covenant, priesthood, or sacrifice changed over the centuries (a weakness here was his making the traditional Christian assumption that Old Testament faith degenerated as time passed).

Further, it soon becomes clear that his image of one faith "underlying" the whole Old Testament does not work. There is no indication within (for instance) Exodus, Ecclesiastes, and Nahum that they have the same underlying convictions. A better way to picture the idea that there is one Old Testament faith is to think in terms of a theology issuing from the Old Testament as a whole rather than one underlying the whole. A "big picture" emerges from the Old Testament, to which Genesis, Esther, the Song of Songs and Isaiah all make their distinctive contribution.

Eichrodt's emphasis on the covenant does put us on the track of two key elements in this big picture. The Old Testament is about Yhwh and Israel, the two parties involved in that covenant relationship.

Yhwh

A fundamental Old Testament challenge is, "Acknowledge that Yhwh is God" (Ps 100:2). While the Old Testament can use the Hebrew word *elohim* to refer to supernatural beings other than Yhwh, it is clear that Yhwh is God *par excellence*. "Yhwh is the great king

² In English, 2 vols, London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961-67.

over all gods" (Ps 95:3). Yhwh is not just one god among gods but *the* "God of gods" (Deut 10:17). Yhwh's relationship to other deities is traditionally formulated in terms of the development of monotheism, belief in only one God, but this way of framing the question imposes a perspective from the later history of Christian thought. The Old Testament question was not "how many gods are there" (one or three or a thousand) but "who is God" (Baal or Marduk or Yhwh). And the Old Testament's attitude to the "gods" that other nations worshiped was not to deny their existence but to demote them to Yhwh's servants. Only Yhwh is God.

In Lev 19:2, Yhwh in person offers an illuminating self-definition that nuances the declaration that only Yhwh is God: "I Yhwh your God am holy." First, Yhwh is not merely "God" but "your God." This takes us back to that relationship involved in the covenant. Yhwh's being "your God" implies a mutual commitment between Yhwh and Israel. Yhwh is committed to Israel, and thus acts on its behalf when it is in need; "I am Yhwh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the household of serfs" (Exod 20:2). And Israel is (supposed to be) committed to Yhwh: "You shall have no other gods over against me" (Exod 20:3). Israel was Egypt's servant; now it is Yhwh's. Yhwh *is* king and lord, sovereign in the heavens and on earth. Yhwh *is to be* Israel's king and lord, its sovereign, but also its protector. ("Yhwh" comprises the consonants of this name; the Hebrew alphabet has no vowels. Jewish practice gave up pronouncing the name, and we are not absolutely sure how to pronounce it, though "Yahweh" is the usual assumption. Following Jewish custom, most English translations of the Old Testament replace the name by the common noun "the LORD." This gives the impression that Old Testament reference to God focuses much more on the image of God as lord than is actually the case.)

In Lev 19:2, however, "I Yhwh your God" is but the subject of a sentence that goes on "...am holy." Arguably that is the most elemental statement that can be made about Yhwh. Indeed, it is close to being a tautology. In Christian usage, "holiness" came to be a moral category, like purity or righteousness. But in Old Testament usage "holiness" is a metaphysical category, a term for a kind of being. To say that someone or something is holy is to say that the person or object is set apart as belonging to the supernatural realm. So to say "Yhwh is holy" has very similar significance to saying "Yhwh is supernatural." It would not in itself indicate that Yhwh is upright or faithful (a Canaanite or Babylonian god could be described as holy without being very upright or faithful).

Yet the word "holy" did come to have those connotations of uprightness and faithfulness, because *in Yhwh's case* being God or being holy *does* involve moral qualities.

Comments by two prophets illustrate the point. Isaiah 5:16 declares, “Yhwh Armies has been majestic in exercising authority, and the holy God has shown himself holy in doing the right thing.” The frightening implication in the context is that Judah has been ignoring Yhwh’s expectations of its community life, and is in the midst of paying for it. Bringing the nation down will be an expression of Yhwh’s holiness because it is an act of integrity and uprightness.

In contrast, Isaiah’s contemporary, Hosea, has Yhwh declaring the intention of similarly putting down the northern kingdom, but then facing the impossibility of doing this, “because I am God and not a man, in your midst as the holy one” (Hos 11:9). Here, Yhwh’s holiness is expressed in refraining from punishment, not in punishing, in mercy not in judgment. The point is taken further subsequently in Isaiah, when Yhwh as the holy one *of Israel* comes to be described as Israel’s restorer or redeemer (e.g., Isa 41:14). The basis for Israel’s restoration is not that Israel deserves it; no change has come over the people. Its basis is simply that Yhwh is Israel’s holy one, the God committed to Israel, and will restore the people because of that commitment. Once more Yhwh’s holiness expresses itself in faithfulness and mercy.

In another self-description Yhwh personally sums up the two sides to this holiness, without actually using the word “holy” (Exod 34:6-7): “Yhwh, God compassionate and gracious, long-tempered and big in commitment and steadfastness, keeping commitment to thousands, carrying waywardness, rebellion, and shortcoming, not at all acquitting, attending to the waywardness of parents on children and on grandchildren to thirds and to fourths.” The self-description does not explain the relationship of the two sides of Yhwh’s character, and while Israel can often see a logic to Yhwh’s faithfulness and wrath, frequently Yhwh is merciful when one might have expected trouble, and sometimes Yhwh sends trouble when Israel cannot see the reason.

The origin of the distinctive name “Yhwh” is obscure. In recounting the revelation of this name to Moses, Exod 3 makes a link with the verb “to be,” though the significance of this link is also obscure, and the Old Testament hardly again refers to it. For Israel “Yhwh” is simply a name. Exodus 3, and the revelation in Exod 6, focus on a different point, that the God who reveals this name is not a new God. Yhwh appears as the God of Israel’s ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And Yhwh appears as the one they knew as El Shadday – and as El Elyon and by means of other such compound names in Genesis.

The explanation in Exod 3 does perhaps points to Yhwh’s capacity to “be there” for Israel in whatever ways different contexts require. This would link with another characteristic feature of Yhwh. While the Old Testament makes clear that Israel often made images of

Yhwh, it never approves of this. Yhwh cannot be imaged. Yhwh is a being who speaks and acts. An image cannot convey that; it can only mislead. The rationale for banning images is thus not that Yhwh is spiritual rather than bodily, though if we interpret Yhwh's being "spirit" in the Old Testament's own terms, that would underline this point, as Yhwh's spirit stands for Yhwh's dynamic power.

Israel

And what is Israel? Having lifted the Israelites out of serfdom in Egypt and brought them to Sinai, Yhwh declares that if they now live by the covenant expectation that Yhwh lays down "you will be my personal possession from among all the peoples, because all the earth is mine, but you - you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6).

So Israel is one of the "peoples" of the world; "the people Israel" is a common expression. Israel is an ethnic group, and other words describing Israel also suggest that it is like a family writ large. It is a "household," a collection of "clans," comprising "ancestors" (fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers) and "descendants" (children, grandchildren). As the KJV has it, these people are "the children of Israel." Israel does not comprise a collection of people who decide to join it, so that the faith decisions of individuals are decisive to what it is. You do not *have* to be born into this people; you can be adopted into it, and then become as real a family member as someone who was born into it. But the people exists independently of such individual choices, a sign of the fact that it exists by God's choice not by human initiative, that its existence as a corporate body is prior to its being made up of discrete individuals, and also that its members are expected to relate to one another like the members of a family.

In Exod 19:5-6, Yhwh adds a series of other descriptions of Israel. As well as being a people, Israel is a "nation," a political entity relating to other political entities. It functions not merely in the familial realm but in the realm of history. In being freed from Egypt, it is not freed from involvement in the world of the nations of which Yhwh is Lord. What kind of nation it is will vary; it begins as one in which leadership is diffused, then it becomes a monarchic state, then it is the subaltern of an imperial power. But it never ceases to be an entity involved in history and international relations.

Standing in some tension with that is the fact that it is a "kingdom." There is some appropriateness in its being a nation in which power is diffused, because its king is Yhwh. Yhwh reigns over it. The covenant puts Yhwh into the position of an imperial power that lays down its expectations of subordinate powers; they are expected to be utterly loyal to the Great King and not to submit themselves to any other power. There is then some tension with Israel's being either a monarchic state with human kings, or the subaltern of an

imperial power. Yet Yhwh allows both of these, in different ways as consequences of Israel's resistance to simply having Yhwh as king.

Further, Israel is a kingdom of priests. Other peoples had priests who could draw near to their gods in the way that ordinary people could not, and could mediate the gods' instructions to their people. Israel was designed to be a people who could all draw near to God and could all hear God speak. There is thus again some tension with the idea that Israel, too, will soon have a priesthood, by God's decree and by the people's desire (Exod 20:16).

And it is a "holy" nation. There is some ambiguity about these statements concerning what Israel is destined to be. It *is* a kingdom where Yhwh reigns; it is *to be* a kingdom where Yhwh reigns. It *is* a holy nation, and it is *to be* a holy nation. As is the case when the word "holy" applies to Yhwh, the term describes Israel's metaphysical position or nature, not its moral nature. Yhwh has already made the point in calling Israel Yhwh's "personal possession." As well as controlling state resources, a king had his own private, personal wealth (extra significance thus attaches to his giving from this; see 1 Chr 29:1-4). All the nations likewise belong to Yhwh, but Israel is Yhwh's special personal possession; no one can trespass on that. To speak of Israel as "holy" makes the same point. Its association with Yhwh means it shares in Yhwh's distinctiveness, over against the rest of the world. It is no ordinary people. But as is the case with Yhwh, its holiness comes to have moral implications. Israel is to be like Yhwh in also being characterized by uprightness and faithfulness.

The World

In a variety of ways the Old Testament makes clear that putting Israel in a special position does not mean Yhwh has written off the rest of the world. Israel exists within the context of Yhwh's intention so to bless Abraham that all earth's families will make that blessing the paradigm for the blessing they seek (Gen 12:1-3). While this affirmation highlights what Yhwh will do for Abraham, it appears in the setting of a narrative that presupposes Yhwh's concern for all the nations. Thus it also indicates what Yhwh will do for them. Indeed, all the Old Testament's talk of what Yhwh will do for Israel links to Yhwh's intentions for the world. That psalm urging acknowledgment of Yhwh as God actually addresses all the earth, and like many psalms makes the assumption that what Yhwh has done for Israel is good news for the world. Among the prophets, all three parts of the book of Isaiah speak of Yhwh's involvement with the whole world. Assyria and Egypt will come to share Israel's position as "my people" and "my handiwork" (19:24). "Turn to me and be delivered, all earth's extremities," Yhwh urges the nations passing from Babylon's suzerainty to Persia's (45:22); again, the context emphasizes how the world's acknowledgment of Yhwh is good news for Israel, but in doing

so indicates Yhwh's concern for the world. And Isaiah almost ends with these survivors becoming Yhwh's emissaries, some of them turned into priests in the temple (66:18-21).

Yhwh is also involved with and concerned for the non-human world. The Old Testament's opening makes that clear in relating the week's work God undertook in creating the world. Humanity has no place until Friday afternoon, created then to subdue the animate world on God's behalf, but not free to eat from it. It reexpresses the point in the subsequent story of the orchard (usually reckoned to be an older story, on which Gen 1 is then a kind of midrash). There humanity is formed first to "serve" this orchard. The picture of a world with its own significance before God, independent of that of humanity, is taken further in the Psalms (e.g., Ps 104). These also call the animate and inanimate world into worship of Yhwh (e.g., Pss. 148 - 50). When Yhwh finally appears to Job, it is to observe how much bigger the world is than Job has allowed. It has its own significance independently of Job; if Job has a fault, it is reckoning that the world revolves around him. Yhwh does also note that elements within the world are resistant to Yhwh's lordship. Yhwh's words correspond to the perspective of the Psalms and of the commission to subdue the earth. Yhwh's project in creating the world is not completed, but Yhwh will bring it to completion.

Gerhard von Rad

After Eichrodt, the mid-part of the twentieth century came to a climax with the work of Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament professor in Germany, who produced his two-volume *Old Testament Theology* in the 1950s.³ Eichrodt had acknowledged the diverse way the Old Testament handled individual themes, but put the emphasis on there being one faith implicit in the Old Testament as a whole. Von Rad reversed this. He acknowledges the possibility of drawing a picture of Israel's understanding of God, of God's relationship of the world, and so on, and his *Theology* includes sections on subjects such as "Israel's Ideas about Time and History" and "The Law," but he reckons it more appropriate to focus on the way Israel actually spoke of Yhwh. And the distinctive way it did that was by telling the story of Yhwh's activity in its history. That takes one form in the gargantuan narratives that dominate the Old Testament; it takes another form in the distinctive way the Prophets talk about Yhwh's activity in history not as a past event but as a future one.

The parts of the Old Testament that do not relate very clearly to Yhwh's activity in history, notably the Wisdom books, von Rad deals with at the end of his first volume under the rubric "Israel Before Jahweh (Israel's Answer)." But subsequently he wrote a whole book

³ In English, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd/New York: Harper, 1962-65.

on *Wisdom in Israel*⁴ which in effect constitutes a third volume of his *Theology*. It stands in tension with the emphasis on history that dominates his *Theology* yet heralds the way Wisdom and forms of creation thinking would come back to life in the last decades of the twentieth century. Both on the large canvas, then, and in his study of individual parts of the Old Testament, von Rad emphasized the diversity of Israel's faith.

His focus on Yhwh's activity in history draws attention to a key feature of Old Testament faith, though it does so for contextual reasons. For modernity as a whole, history was of supreme importance. More specifically, his work has its place in European history. Although he wrote his *Theology* in the 1950s, he did the creative critical work on which it was based in the 1930s (when Eichrodt was also writing his *Theology*), the context of Barth's rejection of natural theology; Barth sometimes refers to von Rad. It is no coincidence that von Rad subordinates creation to the history of Yhwh's acts in Israel's history. His emphasis on history also parallels the emphasis on "God's acts in history" in the "biblical theology movement" in the U.S.A.⁵ But whereas U.S. scholarship worked against the background of a conservative estimate of the Old Testament's historical value, von Rad worked against the background of the more critical estimate of his teacher Albrecht Alt.⁶ He thus recognizes (as they did not need to) the problem of the gap between the story the Old Testament tells and the events that underlie this story. But his work involves more a recognition of this problem than a resolution of it.

Von Rad also tried to think through questions about the relationship of the Old Testament to Christian faith. His opening assertion in this discussion is that the Old Testament is a book of ever increasing anticipation. It looks not merely for the restoring of the past, but for a whole new future. Thus the way the Old Testament is in due course "absorbed in the New" is the logical end of a process begun by the Old. And the very fact that this absorption was possible also shows that it was appropriate; the Old Testament contained "pointers to Christ." There was a true parallel between what God was doing in Israel and what God was then doing in Christ "in a more intensified form." The first prefigures or typifies the second; the second fulfills the first.

⁴ In English, London: SCM/Nashville: Abingdon, 1972.

⁵ See especially George Ernest Wright, *The God Who Acts* (London: SCM/Chicago: Regnery, 1952).

⁶ See *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966).

Brevard Childs and Walter Brueggemann

In the English-speaking world, at least, the last part of the twentieth century belongs to Brevard Childs and Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament professors in the U.S.A.

The U.S. biblical theology movement came under increasing pressure in the 1960s, and in 1970 Childs pronounced it to be in crisis.⁷ The proliferation of diverse methods of interpretation in the period that followed (liberationist, feminist, deconstructionist, postcolonial...) made this no exaggeration. His proposal was that Old Testament and New Testament theological scholarship needed to pay renewed attention to the fact that these writings are the canonical scriptures of the church. In different subsequent works Childs works with different implications of that fact. The most fundamental is that the scriptures are concerned to make statements about God. Biblical commentaries, even the most theological, are inclined to confine themselves to statements about what Israel believed about God. Childs urges that they should make present-tense truth affirmations about God. It is in this connection that we should consider his emphasis on recovering the church's exegetical tradition, the way Chrysostom, Augustine, Calvin, or Luther interpreted scripture. Likewise, for Childs "doing theology in a canonical context" means working with the framework of the "rule of the faith" and with the categories and questions of Christian theology, so that he begins his *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*⁸ with a series of chapters on the notion of revelation, a subject that has been important in theology though not (in this sense) within the Old Testament.

Childs urges that the proper object of theological study is the biblical text itself as we have it in its canonical form, not a hypothetical earlier version (J or P or Second Isaiah). One reason for this is the perceptible fact that this text has been shaped to function as canon. It did not come into being through a merely literary process but through a religious one, a process designed to convey the significance of the text for the believing community. He urges that the link between Old and New Testaments within one canon makes the New Testament's use of particular texts (e.g., Ps 8) an appropriate topic for biblical theological reflection. And it makes it appropriate to bring together the varying biblical material on a subject (Old Testament and New Testament).

Childs and Brueggemann see themselves and are often seen by others as very different.⁹ While Brueggemann also emphasizes the Old Testament's theological significance for the church, he refuses to assimilate the Old Testament to church faith. Further, he stands

⁷ See *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

⁸ London: SCM, 1985/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986.

⁹ Brueggemann's *The Book that Breathes New Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 165-79, includes his review of Childs and Childs's review of him.

within a dominant late twentieth-century strand of mainstream scholarship rather than seeking to redirect it. Rather, he stands within two dominant streams, study of the literary and rhetorical nature of the Old Testament documents and of the way they create alternative worlds, and study that uses the tools of sociology to analyze the way writing and propagating (or canonizing) texts is a means of exercising power. One of his key insights on Old Testament theology is his identifying the tension between theology that affirms order and theology that questions it. This then corresponds to a reality within society. There are forces that emphasize God's undergirding of order in the world, God's ensuring that obedience to God and blessing in experience are linked; these are forces that hold power in society and have a vested interest in the idea that things are OK as they are. And there are forces that emphasize God's subverting of order and leading the oppressed to freedom, that protest the fact that obedience does not lead to blessing; these are forces that hold no power in society and have a vested interest in the idea that things are not OK as they are and need to change. The conviction that the Old Testament holds together convictions that are in intense mutual dialogue underlies his *Theology of the Old Testament*, tellingly subtitled *Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*.¹⁰

The fact that Brueggemann approaches the Old Testament as a whole in light of this conviction about society affects his approach to all its texts, as the approaches of Eichrodt, von Rad, or Childs affect their approach to all its texts; one can predict how their interpretation will come out. Nevertheless Brueggemann has one key characteristic that matches the stance of Childs, his insistence on paying sustained attention to the text of the Old Testament itself. This links with another conviction they share, that the Enlightenment or modernity led theology astray, though whereas Childs then wants to go behind modernity, Brueggemann wants to go forward beyond it. In commentaries he, too, deals with the actual text of Genesis, Samuel, Psalms, or Jeremiah, and does not seek to identify earlier versions or identify the historical events that underlie the text. And he insists on facing the demands of all the texts he studies, including ones that are not very congenial to Western Christians, such as the account of Joshua's destruction of Hazor, the frightening prayers in Psalms 109 or 137, or the stress on Yhwh's holiness in Ezekiel.

Old Testament Theology as a Christian Enterprise

To Christians, it may seem strange that Old Testament theologies have all been written by Christians (indeed, almost exclusively by Protestants). Yet the very expression "Old Testament theology" puts us on the track of a major reason for this. That phrase

¹⁰ Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.

presupposes a particular way of looking at the Hebrew-Aramaic scriptures. They are the first part of a twofold canon. Further, the expression “old testament/covenant” comes from a New Testament passage that unfavorably contrasts this “old testament/covenant” with the “new testament/covenant.” It says of Israel at Sinai, “their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ” (2 Cor 3:14 KJV; cf. 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 3:15). So the expression “Old Testament” suggests something inferior that has now passed away.

Great Old Testament theologians such as Eichrodt and von Rad are interested in the Old Testament because they believe it has intrinsic theological value. Yet they are also committed to the view that there is an essential link between the Old Testament and the New. Eichrodt sees Old Testament theology’s aim as to construct “a complete picture of the OT realm of belief” but also to show how the Old Testament drives forward towards Christ, “in whom the noblest powers of the OT find their fulfilment. Negative evidence in support of this statement is afforded by the torso-like appearance of Judaism in separation from Christianity.” So Old Testament theology is concerned “to see that this comprehensive picture [of the Old Testament realm of belief] does justice to the essential relationship with the NT.”¹¹ Eichrodt both undergirds and undermines his point by critiquing the Old Testament itself where he sees it manifesting features that characterize Judaism and not Christianity, such as its stress on a life of detailed obedience to God. In other words, a strain in his work looks anti-Jewish and involves representing Judaism in a way that does not correspond to its own self-understanding.

Von Rad, in turn, dedicates his last hundred pages to “the Old Testament and the New,” and asks, does not reading the Old Testament as “an object that can be adequately interpreted without reference to the New Testament, turn out to be fictitious from a Christian point of view?”¹² Old Testament theology only counts as theology when it makes explicit links between the Old Testament and the New and is able to make people believe that the two Testaments belong together.¹³

Childs, too, strongly affirms that “the discipline of Old Testament theology is essentially a Christian discipline” presupposing a relationship between the life and history of Israel and that of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ In contrast, however, Brueggemann sees the Hebrew-Aramaic scriptures as “intransigently Jewish” in their “openness to ambiguity and contradiction,”¹⁵ though Childs declares that “the irony emerging from his description of God is one that no serious, religious

¹¹ *Theology of the OT* 1: 25, 26, 27 (the first and last phrases are italicized).

¹² *OT Theology* 2:321.

¹³ *OT Theology* 2:428-29.

¹⁴ *OT Theology in a Canonical Context*, 7.

Jew can tolerate.”¹⁶ The Christian scholars are competing to be able to say “I’m more Jewish than you.”

Jewish Biblical Theology

The Christian assumptions of Old Testament theology make it not surprising that Jewish scholars have not felt drawn to the discipline. It has seemed doubtful whether Jews and Christians can discuss biblical theology because for Christians “biblical theology is concerned with christological issues in a way that excludes the Jew.”¹⁷ Other factors have also likely contributed. Whereas Christians have often assumed that they have a two-part canon while Judaism just reads the Hebrew-Aramaic scriptures, actually Jews are not much more involved with these scriptures than Christians are. As Christians pay more lip service than real attention to the Old Testament, so Jews focus more on the Mishnah and Talmud than on the scriptures. And they read the latter through that lens of the Mishnah and Talmud as Christians read them through the lens of the New Testament. That links with Judaism’s focus on faithfulness in living the right kind of life rather than in believing the right sort of things (orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy), or on faith as trust in God rather than faith as a collection of doctrines.¹⁸ The category of biblical theology, with Old Testament theology as a subset, is related to Protestant stress on “scripture alone.” Its development was an aspect of the development of biblical criticism, whose own concern was to distance biblical study from commitment to the church’s traditional ways of interpreting scripture. But like Roman Catholicism, Judaism takes a much more positive view of the community’s accumulated tradition concerning the interpretation of scripture, and assumes that scripture and this tradition form a continuous stream of insight, so that it is neither appropriate nor necessary to consider the two separately. “There can be no Jewish biblical theology; there can only be Jewish theology.”¹⁹

¹⁵ “Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern,” in Allis Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky (ed.), *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 97-108 (104).

¹⁶ See his review of Brueggemann’s *Theology of the OT* in Brueggemann, *The Book That Breathes New Life*, 174.

¹⁷ Jon D. Levenson, “Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology,” in Jacob Neusner and others (ed.), *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 281-307 (295). The sentence is interestingly omitted from the reprint of this article in Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: WJK, 1993), 33-61.

¹⁸ Cf. Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (reprinted New York: Harper, 1961); Leo Adler, *The Biblical View of Man* (Jerusalem/New York: Urim, 2007), pp. 9-10.

¹⁹ Benjamin D. Sommer, “Unity and Plurality in Jewish Canons,” in Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser (ed.), *One Scripture or Many?* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2004), 108-50 (149). See further his paper “Dialogical Biblical Theology” in Leo Perdue (ed.), *Biblical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008).

Yet it can also be said that “the native theology of traditional Judaism is a biblical theology.”²⁰ Judaism has long engaged in theological study of its scriptures, as the work of twentieth-century figures such as Martin Buber, Yehezkel Kaufmann, and Jacob Milgrom indicates, even if they of course did not call it “Old Testament theology.”²¹ The chapter headings of Louis Jacobs’ *A Jewish Theology*²² would hardly raise eyebrows as the chapter headings for an Old Testament theology.

The end of the twentieth century in fact saw developing Jewish interest in what it is appropriate for Jews to call “biblical theology.” Arguably this involved not so much an increase in Jews thinking theologically about the scriptures but their doing it in dialogue with Christian scholars as an aspect and result of the way general scholarly study of the scriptures had become more inter-confessional. For better or for worse Jews thus became drawn into scholarly debate about method in doing biblical theology instead of simply doing it. This likely reflected factors such as the increased involvement of Jews in biblical scholarship, the development of Jewish-Christian dialogue, and Jewish resistance simply to let Christian views stand without being questioned. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Samuel Schechter urged Jews to fight the “intellectual persecution” that was attempting to destroy the Jewish community’s Bible with the tools of higher criticism by means of its anti-Semitic higher-critical theories, and “to think out our theology for ourselves.”²³ At the time of writing, no Jewish biblical scholar has produced an actual “biblical theology,” though one of the editors of this volume has indicated that he is working on one,²⁴ and a number of Jewish scholars have produced interesting and far-reaching individual studies that can come close to offering a wide-angle perspective.²⁵

²⁰ Michael A. Fishbane, *Judaism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 58.

²¹ See Sommer’s survey in “Dialogical Biblical Theology.

²² London: DLT/New York: Behrman, 1973.

²³ “Higher Criticism – Higher Anti-Semitism,” in *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (Cincinnati: Ark, 1915), 35-39 (see 38) (cf. Levenson, “Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology,” 290 [*The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 43]).

²⁴ See <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/1056.asp>.

²⁵ See especially the work of John Levenson in *Sinai and Zion* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) and *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), also *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993); *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006). James Barr comments that Levenson’s discussion of “Why Jews are not Interested in Biblical Theology” is undermined by the fact that “no one looks more like a successful Jewish biblical theologian than he himself does” (*The Concept of Biblical Theology* [London: SCM/Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], 294).

The Difference that Faith Makes

Can biblical theology then be done only by (Jewish or Christian) faith, so that it is not an objective exercise? There are several aspects to this question. Whether Yhwh brought about Judah's deliverance from Sennacherib is a matter of faith, but whether and how Isaiah thought it did so is surely not. Whether Yhwh is God is a matter of faith; what is Yhwh's personality profile in the scriptures is surely not. Interpreters may disagree about the nature of that personality profile, but such disagreement is not very different from other interpretative differences between different readers. And Jewish reflection on the theological significance of the apparently non-historical nature of much of the scriptures is similar to Christian reflection.²⁶

On the other hand, particular faith positions do make one see certain things, and differences between conclusions may indicate that their advocates started from a particular faith position. It is a fundamental insight of hermeneutics that what we see is decisively shaped by who we are and what we already think. It is always easy to perceive this in other people and generations than in ourselves. We have noted that the history of Old Testament theology up to the present day illustrates the point. This is not a reason for despair. The assumptions, frameworks, and questions that make us misconstrue some things do enable us to see other things. The dynamics of this process are a reason to be open to looking at issues from varying angles.

Whereas for Christians these scriptures are "the Old Testament," for Jews they are "the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings," or (to use an acronym for the Hebrew phrase) the Tanak. For Christians they move from the past (the narrative from Genesis to Esther) through the present (Job to Song of Songs) to the future (Isaiah to Malachi, neatly closing with promises of a forerunner that the New Testament can apply to John the Baptist). For Jews they move from Israel's establishment as a Torah-shaped community (the Torah) through its failure and promised renewal (the Former and Latter Prophets) to its ongoing life with God (the Writings). While the Protestant Old Testament follows the order of the Greek Bible but the contents of the Tanak (omitting the works not accepted in the Jewish community), it may be that in origin both arrangements go back to Jewish communities, but it looks significant which arrangement each community chose.²⁷

Looking at these scriptures in light of Jewish faith rather than Christian faith, one sees new emphases. The Torah (not "law")

²⁶ See Marc Zvi Brettler, "Biblical History and Jewish Biblical Theology," *Journal of Religion* 77 (1997), 563-83.

²⁷ See Marvin A. Sweeney, "Tanak versus Old Testament," in Henry T. C. Sun and others (ed.), *Problems in Biblical Theology* (Rolf Knierim Festschrift; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 353-72.

becomes a gift; the Jewish community has never perceived it as a burden (as von Rad had noted). The wilderness sanctuary and the temple gain new significance. Sacrifice gains a new profile; sacrifice is not merely a (temporary) solution to the problem of sin but a wide-ranging means of giving outward expression to our worship. Interesting questions arise concerning the relationship of Sinai and Zion. It becomes clear that the land is a very prominent theme (Brueggemann had seen this).²⁸ The individual human being and individual salvation become less important; the community and the Israelite people become more important. A doctrine of universal human sinfulness becomes rather insignificant; a challenge to human obedience becomes rather more significant. In prayer, an acknowledgment of sinfulness also becomes less significant than a freedom to challenge God. On the other hand, the importance of eternal life and the Messiah for some strands of Judaism parallels the importance they have had for much Christian study, even though they are not very prominent in the scriptures themselves.

Jewish biblical theology and Christian Old Testament theology see the Hebrew-Aramaic scriptures from different angles and perceive different aspects of them, aspects that the other study misses. The Hebrew-Aramaic scriptures are a rich and varied collection of narratives, insights, and biddings regarding God, Israel, the world, and life. Both the Mishnah, the Talmud, and other Jewish traditions on one hand, and the New Testament and other Christian traditions of theology and spirituality on the other, allow themselves to be shaped by aspects of that collection, ignore other aspects, and subvert yet other aspects, as does any attempt to write an Old Testament theology (except – an author is tempted to add – my own).

Further reading

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²⁸ See *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

Von Rad, Gerhard. *Old Testament Theology*. 2 vols. Edinburgh:
Oliver and Boyd/New York: Harper, 1962 and 1965.